

BROCK

Home Grown

Spring 2022

Farming in the UK has reached a critical situation. A whole host of factors have, more or less, come together to present significant challenges that need addressing now. Our ability to produce home grown food and have it processed and distributed here is one of our most important strategic assets. Food security is vital and with the very unstable world out there our population is vulnerable to food shortages. Unfortunately our average consumer thinks that the big retailer Supermarkets will never fail! But look what happened with the Brexit and Covid-19 problems, the slightest hint of a shortage and there was panic! History has shown us that in the past 140 years too much reliance on imported food left our country almost destitute. The factors that we are up against now are the big change from prioritising food production, with the security that started with the 1947 Agriculture Act, to environmental management and lower levels of financial support. Add in climate change and extreme weather outbreaks, carbon net zero targets, media attacks on livestock farming, overseas trade deals that will undercut our home grown high quality produced food and upset the balance of supply and demand, and the already mentioned consequences of Brexit and Covid-19 bringing with it the critical problems of hands-on labour for the harvesting of vegetable and fruit crops, and you can see where we are. The present energy crisis has impacted on the rocketing price of artificial fertiliser, a prime ingredient for intensive agriculture. Coincidentally these high prices could be the incentive to apply the mind to the SFI (Sustainable Farm Incentive) and start planning for improving the soil's physical properties and building carbon reserves. If we look after the soil, the soil will look after us. This quote comes from the organic farms agency, *The Soil Association*, over 60 years ago! Another looming problem area will be the large corporate bodies that are taking up large areas of land to plant trees to offset their carbon emissions. The current political focus seems so wrongly biased against food production; they are not prioritising food security. Yet DEFRA (Department for the environment, Farming, and Rural Affairs) boss George Eustice is claiming they are but I suspect that he is looking at total supply, i.e. including imports! The recent Farming Rules for Water issued by the Environment Agency have not been thought through in a fair and balanced way, putting huge financial pressure on some farmers; and what about the land being returned to nature with the re-wilding projects? OK, relatively small areas of poor unproductive lands do have a place for this but taking vast areas of Hill Farming territory out would be crazy. Of course the existing bog and wet land areas are a vital part of carbon storage and need to be preserved. In the 1970s and early 1980s we were 75% self-sufficient, that figure has now dropped to nearer 60%.

So where are the pluses for home grown food production? High quality, more than a match for the rest of the world; reduced food miles from producer through the food chain to the consumer is an increasingly important factor as energy costs and air pollution problems increase. Traceability and an emphasis on a local fresh supply through the Farm Shop would bring an improved relationship with the consumer building the support for food ethics and the psychological connection to the countryside and Mother Nature. The new environmental regulations highlight biodiversity and improving soil quality through sustainable and regenerative methods. This will be helped by the

returning of animal dung to the soil and, to a lesser extent, by plant residue. There is no doubt in my mind that grazed grass brings the best sequestration of all. This has the potential to produce more with less, a win, win situation. Good news too is the up and coming younger generation of farmers with their positive mind-set and innovative ideas using the latest technological advances. Surely it is time for farming and agriculture to be established as part of a school's curriculum. The consumer needs to be aware of the true cost of food production now that farmers will be relying much more on market forces, they need to understand that home produced quality food has a value that is higher than what they have been used to in recent decades. And consumers also need to prioritise healthy nutrition when they look at their annual monetary income budget. OK, I know that is challenging at the present time when the average person is up against rapidly rising energy costs. Home production could be helped if food procurement from home grown food was better supported by the big corporate bodies like the NHS, the Armed Forces, and the very extensive national catering businesses. And, addressing the vast food waste problem would help with the efficiency of the food chain. This is something that everyone from the food chain operators to the individual can support; when you can see the annual tonnage wasted it seems almost immoral when you consider world poverty never mind the poverty in our own so-called rich nation!

